

The Gangottara Sutra

The Sutra Called "Flawless Purity" *A dialogue with the Laywoman Gangottara*

Thus have I heard.

Once the Buddha was dwelling in the garden of Anathapindika, in the Jeta Grove near Shravasti. At that time, a laywoman named Gangottara came from her dwelling in Shravasti to see the Buddha. She prostrated herself with her head at the Buddha's feet, withdrew to one side, and sat down.

The world honored one asked Gangottara, "Where do you come from?"

The Laywoman asked the Buddha, "World-Honored One, if someone were to ask a magically produced being where he came from, how should the question be answered?"

The World Honored One told her, "A magically produced being neither comes nor goes, is neither born nor perishes; how can one speak of a place from which he comes?"

Then the laywoman asked, "Is it not true that all things are illusory, like magic?"

The Buddha said, "Yes indeed, what you say is true"

Gangottara asked, "If all things are illusory, like magic, why did you ask me where I came from?"

The World Honored One told her, "A magically produced being does not go to the miserable planes of existence, nor to heaven; nor does he attain nirvana. Gangottara is that also true of you?"

The Laywoman replied, "As I see it, if my own body were different from a magically produced one, then I could speak of going to the good and miserable planes of existence, or of attaining Nirvana. I see no difference, though, between my body and a magically produced one, so how can I speak of going to the good or miserable planes, or of attaining nirvana?"

"Furthermore, World Honored One, nirvana's very nature is such that it is not reborn in the good or miserable planes, nor does it experience parinirvana. I perceive that the same is true of my own nature."

The Buddha asked, "Do you not seek the state of nirvana?"

Gangottara asked in turn, "If this question were put to one who had never come into being, how should it be answered?"

The Buddha replied, "That which has never come into being is nirvana itself."

Gangottara asked, "Are not all things identical with nirvana?"

The Buddha replied, "So they are, so they are."

"World-Honored One, if all things are identical with nirvana, why did you ask me, 'Do you not seek the state of nirvana?' "Furthermore, World-Honored One, if a magically produced being asked another magically produced being, 'Do you not seek the state of nirvana?' what would the answer be?"

The World-Honored One told her, "A magically produced being has no mental attachments (and thus seeks nothing)."

Gangottara inquired, "Does the Tathágata's very question stem from some mental attachment?"

The World-Honored One told her, "I raised the question because there are in this assembly good men and good women who can be brought to maturity. I am free of mental attachments. Why? Because the Tathágata knows that even the names of things are inapprehensible, let alone the things themselves or those who seek nirvana."

Gangottara said, "If so, why all the accumulation of good roots for the attainment of enlightenment?"

[The Buddha replied,] "Neither Bodhisattvas nor their good roots can be apprehended, because in the Bodhisattvas' minds there is no discriminative thought as to whether they are accumulating good roots or not."

Gangottara asked, "What do you mean by 'no discriminative thought'?"

The World-Honored One answered, "The absence of discriminative thought cannot be understood or grasped by means of thinking. Why? Because in the state of no discriminative thought, even the mind is inapprehensible, let alone the mental functions. This state, in which the mind is inapprehensible, is called inconceivable. It cannot be grasped or realized; it is neither pure nor impure. Why so? Because, as the Tathágata always teaching, all things are as empty and unimpeded as space."

Gangottara inquired, "If all things are empty space, why does the World-Honored One speak of form, feeling, conception, impulse and consciousness; the eighteen elements; the twelve entrances; the twelve links of dependent origination; the defiled and the undefiled; the pure and the impure; samsara and nirvana?"

The Buddha told Gangottara, "When I speak of a 'self', for example, although I express the concept by a word, actually, the nature of 'self' is inapprehensible. I speak of form, but in reality the nature of form is also inapprehensible, and so it is with the other [dharmas], up to nirvana. Just as we cannot find water in mirages, so we cannot find a nature in form, and so it is with the others, up to nirvana.

"Gangottara, only a person who cultivates pure conduct in accordance with the Dharma, perceiving that nothing can be apprehended, deserves to be called a real cultivator of pure conduct. Since the arrogant say that they have apprehended something, they cannot be said to be firmly established in genuine pure conduct. Such arrogant people will be terrified and doubtful when they hear this profound Dharma. They will be unable to liberate themselves from birth, old age, sickness, death, worry, sorrow, suffering and distress.

"Gangottara, after my parinirvana, there will be some people able to spread this profound Dharma, which can stop the rounds of samsara. However, some fools, because of their evil views, will hate those Dharma-masters, and will contrive to harm them. Such fools will fall to the hells for that."

Gangottara asked, "You speak of 'this profound Dharma which can stop the rounds of samsara.' What do you mean by 'stop the rounds of samsara'?"

The World-Honored One replied, "To stop the rounds of samsara is to [penetrate] reality, the realm of the inconceivable. Such a Dharma cannot be damaged or destroyed. Hence, it is called the Dharma that can stop the rounds of samsara."

Then the World-Honored One smiled graciously and emitted from his forehead blue, yellow, red, white, and crystalline lights. The lights illuminated all the numerous lands, reaching as high as the Brahma Heaven, then returned and entered the top of the Buddha's head.

Seeing this, the Ven. Ānanda thought to himself, "The Tathāgata, the Worthy One, the Supremely Enlightened One, does not smile without a reason." He rose from his seat, uncovered his right shoulder, knelt on his right knee, and joined his palms toward the Buddha, inquiring, "Why did the Buddha smile?"

The Buddha replied, "I call that, in the past, a thousand Tathāgatas also taught this Dharma here, and each of those assemblies was also led by a laywoman named Gangottara. After hearing this Dharma preached, the laywoman and all the assembly left the household life. [In time,] they entered the nirvana without residue."

Ānanda asked the Buddha, "What name should be given to this sutra and how should we accept and uphold it?"

The Buddha said, "This sutra is called 'Flawless Purity', and you should accept and uphold it by that name."

During the preaching of this sutra, seven hundred monks and four hundred nuns were liberated from defilements forever and their minds were set free.

At that time, the gods of the Desire-Realm magically produced various kinds of wonderful celestial flowers and scattered them upon the Buddha, saying "Rare indeed is this laywoman, who can converse fearlessly with the Tathágata on equal terms. She must have served and made offerings to countless Buddhas, and planted good roots of every kind in their presence.

After the Buddha had finished speaking this sutra, the laywoman Gangottara and all the gods, humans, asuras, gandharvas, and so forth were jubilant over the Buddha's teaching. They accepted it with faith and began to follow it with veneration.